

## Codebook for Controversy-Level Coding

### 1. Purpose

This codebook provides systematic instructions for coding debate motions along a binary controversy dimension (High vs. Low). The goal is to capture whether a motion involves fundamental value conflicts or can be resolved primarily through empirical/technical considerations.

### 2. Theoretical Background

The controversy classification draws on established frameworks in political science and communication research:

- Moral Foundations Theory: Issues triggering competing moral intuitions (care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, sanctity/degradation) tend to produce irreconcilable disagreements (Haidt, 2012; Graham et al., 2013).
- Issue Publics Research: “Easy issues” involve technical judgments with expert consensus, while “hard issues” involve value trade-offs where expertise cannot resolve disagreement (Carmines & Stimson, 1980).
- Deliberative Democracy Literature: Controversial issues are characterized by “reasonable pluralism”—multiple defensible positions rooted in different but legitimate value systems (Rawls, 1993; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004).
- Empirical Indicators: Research shows high-controversy topics exhibit greater opinion polarization, more substantial partisan alignment, and resistance to factual correction (Kahan, 2013; Druckman & McGrath, 2019).

### 3. Coding Categories

High Controversy (Code = 1)

Definition: Motions where disagreement stems primarily from conflicting values, identities, or worldviews rather than factual disputes. Even with perfect information, reasonable people would disagree due to different moral/philosophical premises.

Key Indicators (must meet  $\geq 2$  of the following):

Indicator	Description	Diagnostic Question
Moral Trade-offs	Involves competing fundamental values (liberty vs. security, equality vs. efficiency, individual rights vs.	“Does resolution require choosing between core moral principles?”

	collective good)	
Identity Salience	Central to group identities (religious, cultural, partisan) or triggers strong emotional responses	“Would people feel their identity is under threat?”
No Expert Consensus	Experts in relevant fields disagree not on facts but on what <i>should</i> be prioritized	“Can empirical research definitively resolve this?”
Distributional Conflict	Creates clear winners/losers across societal groups with zero-sum perceptions	“Does one group’s gain necessitate another’s loss?”
Symbolic Stakes	Seen as precedent-setting for broader cultural/ideological battles	“Is this part of a larger ‘culture war’?”

Typical Domains: Abortion, gun control, death penalty, affirmative action, immigration restrictions, religious freedom vs. anti-discrimination, euthanasia, same-sex marriage, hate speech regulation

#### Low Controversy (Code = 0)

Definition: Motions where disagreement is primarily empirical, technical, or instrumental. Resolution depends on factual evidence, cost-benefit analysis, or implementation feasibility. Shared goals exist; debate centers on means.

Key Indicators (must meet  $\geq 2$  of the following):

Indicator	Description	Diagnostic Question
Technical Optimization	Debate focuses on efficacy, efficiency, or best practices within shared objectives	“Is this about finding the most effective solution?”
Expert Convergence	Professional consensus exists or disagreements are empirical (testable hypotheses)	“Do specialists largely agree on the diagnosis/solution?”
Procedural/Administrative	Concerns governance structures, resource allocation, or policy implementation details	“Is this mainly about ‘how’ rather than ‘why’ or ‘whether’?”
Incremental Reform	Adjusts existing systems without challenging core principles	“Does this preserve underlying values while improving outcomes?”
Scientific/Economic Framing	Arguments rely on data, models, ROI calculations, or scientific evidence	“Can cost-benefit analysis largely settle this?”

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**Typical Domains:** Infrastructure investment, renewable energy subsidies (when climate change is accepted), tax code simplification, digital government services, public health measures (non-coercive), education funding levels, transportation policy, bureaucratic efficiency reforms

#### 4. Decision Tree

START: Read motion carefully

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Q1: Does the motion involve fundamental rights,  
moral principles, or “what kind of society should we be”?

YES → Lean toward High (1)

NO → Continue

↓

Q2: Is there strong scientific/expert consensus  
on both diagnosis AND solution?

YES → Lean toward Low (0)

NO → Continue

↓

Q3: Would resolution require one group to sacrifice  
deeply-held values or group interests?

YES → Code as High (1)

NO → Continue

↓

Q4: Is disagreement primarily about facts,  
costs, or implementation?

YES → Code as Low (0)

NO → Code as High (1)

## 5. Coding Examples

High Controversy (1) – Exemplars

Motion	Rationale
<i>THBT abortion should be legal until viability</i>	Core value conflict: bodily autonomy vs. fetal rights; no factual resolution possible
<i>THW ban hate speech</i>	Value trade-off: free expression vs. protection from harm; identity-salient
<i>THBT affirmative action does more harm than good</i>	Distributional + moral: competing definitions of fairness/merit; group interests
<i>THW allow assisted suicide for terminal patients</i>	Sanctity vs. autonomy: religious/philosophical divide on life's value
<i>THBT we should open all borders</i>	Identity + security: national sovereignty vs. cosmopolitanism; symbolic stakes

Low Controversy (0) – Exemplars

Motion	Rationale
<i>THW invest more in public transportation infrastructure</i>	Technical optimization: cost-benefit calculation; shared goal of mobility
<i>THW digitize all government services</i>	Procedural efficiency: implementation question; no core value conflict
<i>THW increase R&amp;D funding for renewable energy</i>	Scientific consensus (on climate) + economic instrument; means to shared end
<i>THBT governments should use ranked-choice voting</i>	Electoral mechanics: empirical question of representation; procedural reform
<i>THW mandate nutrition labels on all packaged foods</i>	Transparency + public health: low-stakes; expert agreement on benefits

Borderline Cases – Guidance

Motion	Coding Decision	Reasoning
<i>THW ban single-use plastics</i>	Moderate-High (1)	Though environmental, involves lifestyle restrictions → liberty vs. collective good

<i>THW require COVID-19 vaccination for public employees</i>	High (1)	Bodily autonomy vs. public health; became identity-salient during pandemic
<i>THW increase taxes on sugary drinks</i>	Low-Moderate (0)	Paternalism debate exists, BUT framed as public health instrument → treat as low unless culturally salient
<i>THW ban autonomous weapons systems</i>	Moderate-High (1)	AI ethics + just war theory; moral stakes in delegation of lethal force

Resolution Rule: When uncertain, apply the “2 out of 5 indicators” rule from Section 3. Ties go to High (1) to capture potential value conflict.

## 6. References

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